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## Mahaska County's First School

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## MAHASKA COUNTY'S FIRST SCHOOL.

BY MRS. T. G. PHILLIPS.

Fifty years sounds like a long time to the young. The year 1843 seems to young people of today like a time away in the dim past. It doesn't seem so long ago to those who were young men and young women then. In 1843 a considerable tract of as fine land as the eye of man ever beheld (of which Mahaska county was a part) had been purchased by the U. S. government from the Indians. The Indians having on the first day of May of that year peaceably retired to lands farther west, this charming region was open to settlement by civilized white people. A number of families from the settlements near the Mississippi river, took advantage of this opportunity to make for themselves homes. That was before the day of telegraphs. There was not a railroad within hundreds of miles of this grand region. Yet somehow its fame had reached the ears of men and women away in the eastern States and in the middle States, whose hearts were brave, fortunes small and children many. Some of those honest, courageous, intelligent sons and daughters of Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia, packed their few household goods into wagons, bade farewell to the scenes of their childhood, the old familiar meeting-house, the school house, and with horses or ox teams slowly wended their way toward this lovely, but uncultivated garden. Some of these men left their families in the inhabited portions of the Territory whilst they staked out their claims and built log cabins. One room sufficed for a family, small or large. Some of these families even lived for a while in bark huts which had been left by the Indians, where beads were lying about on the ground in such quantities that children picked them up by the pint.

Kishkekosh is not found on the map of Mahaska county today. But that "deserted village" once had an existence

on the bluffs overlooking the classic Skunk. Near the deserted village was a deserted burying ground, where in shallow graves, in a sitting posture, were found skeletons of long ago Indians. The young doctor of the settlement, being archeologically inclined, helped himself to one of these skeletons—his purpose, no doubt, being the advancement of science. To the south and west of this village lay a stretch of country—prairie—interspersed with groves, the beauty of which, in its primitive state, no pen can truly describe. These groves of linden and drooping elms, bordered with a fringe of crab-apple and plum trees, just as God planted them, had a beauty all their own. This charming place chanced to be discovered by some of God's noblemen—brave, broad shouldered, manly men. The wives of these men were brave, too. The most of these pioneer men and women had been accustomed to the ordinary comforts of life, but they accepted the situation cheerfully. The men staked out their claims, built rude log cabins, broke their ground, made rails and fenced their fields, planted their crops and went to work to establish homes and provide for their families. These families brought their religion with them. In nearly every one of these rude cabins was erected an altar to the living God. When they gathered around their tables scantily supplied with coarse food, they bowed their heads and gave thanks. There were no houses of worship except "God's first temples," those beautiful groves. Nor was there on September 1st, 1844, a school house in all the region called Mahaska county.

Sometime in August of that year a young lady came to accept the offered shelter of a home in the family of a relative who had settled in that neighborhood. This young lady had taught two terms of school, and had ciphered as far as the single rule of three, knew a little about Kirkham's grammar, something about geography, could write a fair hand, had been first choice at spelling-schools, had been known to spell down a whole school. Heads of families in this primitive settlement straightway set about devising means whereby they might avail themselves of the services of the learned

young woman as instructor to their children. In order to accomplish this it was necessary to erect a school house. Although the official surveyors had not as yet designated the section lines, those men had guessed about where they were and had staked off their claims accordingly. Each sixteenth section having been donated by the government to the public for school purposes, the gift was in this case taken advantage of. This sixteenth section was covered mostly with timber, oak, elm and linden, linden predominating. Linden trees are not only beautiful to look upon, but easy to chop and split. One man who felt a particular interest in having a school house, and in this young girl also, went around and invited five or six others to join him in the enterprise. They readily acquiesced, set a day to commence, repaired to the woods on the border of the sixteenth section, taking with them axes, mauls, wedges, frows, augers, saws and broad-axes. They then proceeded to chop down some linden trees, not taking time to hew them, but built a cabin of round logs, leaving the bark on. They rived out boards of oak to cover it, putting weight-poles on to hold the boards in place. The floor, benches and writing-desk were made of puncheons. Puncheons are made of logs, split and made smooth on one side by hewing with a broad-axe. Some of these early settlers had become experts in hewing puncheons and riving clap-boards. This "temple of learning" was supplied with a sod chimney, a hearth long and wide, not made with stone or brick, but with rich black loam. A log was sawed out of one side of the house leaving a space eight or ten feet long, for the purpose of admitting light. One of these primitive carpenters with a pocket-knife whittled out sticks the proper length, and then placed them in an upright position at regular distances apart along this opening. Glass being a luxury not easily obtained, oiled foolscap paper was pasted over this improvised window-sash. In laying the foundation of this edifice the architects were particular to observe the points of the compass. A door was made by sawing out logs to the proper height and width. No shutters were provided, only

an opening looking toward the south. When the sun shone there was no trouble in telling when noon came.

In order that things might be done in a business-like manner articles of agreement were drawn up, which read something like the following:

ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT.

Articles of agreement made and entered into this, the 9th day of September, one thousand eight hundred and forty-four, between Semira A. Hobbs of the first part, and the undersigned subscribers of the second part, for the consideration of the compensation hereinafter named, the party of the first part agrees to teach a term of school embracing thirteen weeks, beginning on Monday, September 16th, one thousand eight hundred and forty-four. The party of the first part further agrees to keep good order and to the best of her ability teach the following branches, namely, spelling, reading, writing, arithmetic, geography and English grammar, for the sum of one dollar and twenty-five cents per scholar. The party of the second part for the faithful performance of the above promises, agree to pay the above named sum, to-wit, one dollar and twenty-five cents for as many as are attached to our names.

AARON COX, 6.

NATHAN COONTZ, 3.

BRANTLEY STAFFORD, 1.

POULTNEY LOUGHRIDGE, 5.

JOHN CUNNINGHAM, 3.

The 16th was ushered in with a charming morning. The sun rose bright and clear. Everything looked auspicious, even the corn blades and pumpkin vines looked glad. There was a hurrying and scurrying among the girls and boys to find their books and slates, which had been so long unused. Then this young girl teacher with six pupils, all members of the same family, with a basket of corn bread, some dried apple pie and a bottle of milk, went tripping over prairie and through groves to the new school house a mile and a quarter away. How clean and white that puncheon floor looked, how mellow the light through that oiled paper window, how clear of any speck of ashes or soot that sod fire-place. Directly there could be seen coming from different directions, bearing their dinner baskets and books, groups of bright, healthy, happy-looking children. These children came supplied with such books as happened to be in their homes. Several kinds of spellers, almost as many kinds of readers

as there were children who could read. One of the larger girls brought an Olney's Geography and Atlas. That Atlas had a map in it called the "Map of the United States," but on that map was no Minnesota, no Dakota, no Nebraska, no Kansas, no New Mexico, nor Colorado, nor Wyoming, nor Idaho, nor Montana, nor Utah, nor Nevada, nor Arizona, nor any State called Washington or California. This map was in a way three-cornered. At the upper left hand corner, bordering on the Pacific ocean, was a rather narrow looking strip called Oregon Territory. Between the Missouri river and the Rocky mountains was a great almost blank space designated, "uninhabited," and supposed to be uninhabitable. That young girl teacher with such crude facilities, did her best to instruct those boys and girls in the rudiments of what is called a "common school" education. They were all well-behaved, obedient children, tried hard to learn and made creditable advancement. That was one of Iowa's typical autumns. The prairies and sloughs were covered with yellow and purple blossoms. The groves with their borders of sumach and hazel were aglow with all the shades of green and red and yellow and brown. Deer and rabbits scampered over prairie and slough, then darting into the thick groves were soon out of sight. Those pioneers were good marksmen, and along with their corn bread had venison and prairie chickens in abundance. One evening on returning from school the teacher was informed that the head of the family had killed a bear.

The warm, hazy Indian summer days lasted till away toward the last of November. But there came a time eventually when the sky was leaden, and the northeast winds brought flakes of snow, which would sift through the chinks in the roof and walls, would scurry around and find their way in through that open door. When the cold became severe one of the kind, thoughtful mothers sent a coverlet to hang over the door. There was no lack of fuel as there were great big chips, the result of that puncheon hewing, and plenty of dry sticks lying all about, which made splendid fires. That big dirt hearth, by much tramping of little feet,

in course of time sunk to the depth of eight or ten inches below the level of the floor, the edge of which made a convenient seat, where the scholars could keep their feet warm and at the same time study their lessons. The teacher occupied a more dignified seat, as a straight-backed splint-bottomed chair had been provided for her.

The last two or three of the thirteen weeks seemed to drag along pretty slowly, but neither teacher nor scholars ever hinted at such a thing as giving up. Those boys and girls had pluck. They kept warm if they could, but didn't whine if they were a little cold. They were used to cold houses, with only a fire-place, where the face would burn while the back would freeze. That was the order of things generally. There was not a stove of any kind in the whole community. The corn bread was baked in skillets with coals underneath and coals on the lid. The meat and turnips were boiled in pots set on the fire. The hospitality extended to strangers in those little log cabins would amaze the dwellers in Oskaloosa's homes today. Some of the boys and girls who were a part of that little group which composed that humble school, have joined the great majority. Those who remain are old people now—some are grandfathers and grandmothers. All are useful and respectable members of society, the kind we call the bone and sinew of the country. Great things have often grown from very humble beginnings. That crude log school house with its oiled paper windows, puncheon floor and sod chimney, its little band of scholars, and undeveloped teacher, formed the nucleus around which have grown substantial school houses with all the facilities for teaching on nearly every section of land in Mahaska county. Not only the country district school, but high schools with scholarly teachers, and colleges with a score of professors of which Oskaloosa may justly be proud. That first school was a small affair, but was in keeping with everything else. Things generally were small and crude and humble.

About two and a half miles to the west of the spot whereon was located this much-mentioned school, there was

a very diminutive village. This village did as other villages are said to have done. It nestled, not in mountain nooks, by babbling brooks, but in the prairie grass. Each one of the fifteen log cabins seemed to be cuddled down in a nest of its own, trying to hide in a species of grass known as "blue joint." This village, when first seen by that much-mentioned teacher, on Saturday before the opening of that school, was only three months old, but had been christened "Oskaloosa." These first impressions of Oskaloosa were made from a view taken half a mile or more away. On coming into the town there was found to be in one of those little log cabins a store of general merchandise, with a piece of red flannel hung out by the door to designate the kind of business carried on within. When Oskaloosa was visited a month later dozens of frame houses had been built and occupied. Charles Purvine had built and was keeping a tavern (they did not call them hotels then) where the Birdsall House is now. A. J. Davis, the Montana millionaire, had a store on the north side of the square. William B. Street had a store on the west side. There were two blacksmith shops and one tailor shop—all this in October, 1844. The people who founded Oskaloosa were "rustlers." Most of the men and women who first occupied those little log cabins were intelligent, high-souled and full of pluck.

Oskaloosa's daughters of today may be more scholarly, but no more modest and praiseworthy than her girls of '44. The young men who came with little money but lots of brains, have made their way to fortune and fame. Some of the children and grandchildren of those early log cabin dwellers are today among Oskaloosa's most respected and influential citizens.

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GEN. JOHN A. DIX owns a three thousand acre farm in Shelby county, in this State; William H. Seward owns a still bigger farm in Hamilton county, and Horatio Seymour has a good many forty and eighty acre lots up and along the valley of the Des Moines.—*Iowa State Register*, August 17, 1870.



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